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AUTHOR	Benson, Laurence L.
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ABSTRACT

Tallahassee Community College (Florida) can serve as an example of how a student government failed and was successfully resurrected. The initial problem was in adopting rather than adapting the traditional pattern of student government practiced in 4-year institutions. The failure symptoms were: no real authority for student government; indifferent student body; ad-hoc student groups that bypassed their government; elections that were largely popularity contests; real issues skirted while attention was given to procedural matters; and lack of mechanism to replace officers who resigned. To regain the commitment of the whole school, a new student government constitution had to be ratified by a majority of students, administration, and faculty; two faculty and two administrators were made full voting members of the Student Executive Council; students were to hold a majority and a student was always to be chairman. The powers and duties of the council are to: allocate and approve student activities budget; work in conjunction with the inter-organization council; appoint student representatives to the College Senate committees; act as liaison between students, faculty, administrators, with other campuses, and with regional and national affiliations of student government associations; make proposals and recommendations to appropriate authorities; and act as an Appeal Board for student conduct and discipline cases with the Dean of Student Affairs serving as chairman. (CA)

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AN EXPERIMENT IN PARTICIPATORY STUDENT GOVERNMENT

By

Laurence L. Benson

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Tallahassee Community College
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AN EXPERIMENT IN PARTICIPATORY STUDENT GOVERNMENT

Across our nation today the ill winds are carrying little or no good news about the condition of student governments at most community junior colleges. If we are reading these winds correctly, it would appear that for every newly opened two-year college a student government either becomes ineffective, dormant or fails completely.

The mortality rate is probably even greater than this conservative estimate, but no one seems to know exactly the number of student governments which succumb annually. It may be twice that number.

One thing is certain: students are extremely vocal in their demands for a more meaningful role in institutional decision making. And, when students begin to express their desires vigorously, wiser administrators begin to listen carefully.

Is Anyone Concerned?

Fortunately, concern about the ill health of student government goes beyond unhappy, disillusioned students and a handful of sensitive administrators. Some of the more astute student personnel administrators, faculty members, local boards of trustees and authorities directing state systems also are keenly aware of the necessity, wisdom and desirability of giving students more than a token role within the mechanism of college community governance.

Even with all of this recent concern, a dilemma exists about the proper and equitable means of achieving this end.

Concern at Tallahassee Community College became paramount as our student government began to display the usual symptoms of ill health.

Traditional Government Succumbs

Tallahassee Community College student government succumbed to the ailments befalling other institutions when the traditional form popular on most campuses failed miserably within three years after the College began operation.

The College opened in the fall of 1966 with a student government patterned after the historical university model of legislative, executive and judicial branches. Student government struggled to get off the ground but, even with recognition and approval from the administration and the District Board of Trustees, it continued to suffer from all of the recognizable symptoms.

Student government enjoyed no real authority nor was it integrated within the machinery of institutional governance. Students were indifferent and lacked respect for their so-called "duly elected" representatives. Ad hoc student groups by-passed their government by going directly to the administration on matters. Elections were largely popularity contests. At meetings, the real issues were skirted while attention was directed mostly toward procedural matters. Officers resigned and insufficient candidates

could be encouraged to fill nearly 45 vacant offices. Without a quorum, student government was unable to conduct business officially.

Other factors were involved which, as we look back now, were not so much the fault of the students but rather of the approach taken. As with most two-year colleges, Tallahassee Community College had adopted the traditional tripartite pattern of student government practiced for decades in four-year institutions without adapting it to the unique community college student body, nor to the comprehensive concept of these institutions.

The fact that student government requires intensive involvement and an extensive investment of time by students had been overlooked. On our campus, where some 75 - 80 per cent of the students work, time is a precious commodity. The vast majority of students just do not feel it is worth the necessary investment in time, effort and energy to become involved. We have come to the realization that there is a difference between apathy and a genuine lack of time and we are no longer frustrated because larger numbers of students do not participate in student government or other activities.

Yet another factor was traced to the contentment in, and acceptance of, the historical pattern of student government. We were practiced at coping with the familiar and found it to be considerably less threatening to the status quo than the newly emerging models of participatory student government.

With all of these symptoms, it was just a matter of time until the death knell sounded for student government. By March, 1970, the last glimmer of "student life" signs flickered out and the College was without any semblance of student government.

Students Rescue the Situation

Remnant student government officers, and a handful of other students whose concern mounted only after they realized what had been lost, began to lament their misfortune. As expressions of displeasure began to increase, the Dean of Student Affairs and the Director of Student Activities "told it like it was."

Students were reminded that the task of rectifying the situation was theirs. Of course, these administrators also offered to do everything possible to facilitate the resurrection of student government in a more suitable, effective and functional form. But, if past mistakes were to be avoided, the new government had to be of, and for, the students; it should not be "hand-me-down" but rather truly innovative, applicable to the community college student body, participatory, meaningful and viable.

Fortunately, this handful of serious students began to think boldly and creatively. Armed with information about trends towards shared community models of governance, students revised their constitution along participatory lines similar to those now being suggested by many leading authorities and practiced in many of the more dynamic senior institutions.

Participatory Government Is Born

The new constitution of the Students' Executive Council (SEC) reflects three unique aspects; (1) to be ratified, a majority of students, administrators and faculty had to vote favorably on the new constitution, (2) two faculty and two administrators are full-fledged voting members, (3) students hold a majority and the chairman is always a student.

The rationale for requiring campus-wide ratification was to gain the commitment of the entire campus community. It was felt that the opportunity to vote on the new government by administrators and faculty members in addition to the student body not only would involve those groups more deeply by giving them a voice in the outcome but also their endorsement would assure support through the democratic process of majority rule.

Voter turn-out on the day of ratification saw 12 per cent of the students and 28 per cent of the faculty casting ballots. The new constitution was ratified by a majority of 223 to 16. It received favorable endorsement by the College President and was approved by the District Board of Trustees.

Three weeks after ratification of the constitution, 22 per cent of the 2,100 students voted on 13 candidates for the seven student councilmen positions on the SEC. Student interest in the new form of community governance had almost doubled in 21 days.

The participatory aspect of the SEC constitution provides for two full-time faculty representatives nominated by the Committee on Committees of the College Senate and for two full-time administrators nominated by the Dean of Student Affairs.

Faculty and administrative members do not simply serve as "advisors" or "sponsors." Each has the duty to present the viewpoints of his constituency and the right to vote on all issues according to his disposition.

Within one week following campus-wide elections, which are held in the fall and sprirg quarters, the seven duly elected student councilmen receive the names of faculty and administrative nominees and vote secretly to confirm four from the list.

Of the eleven member Council, seven are students and a student is always chairman. Each student also has one vote except for the chairman who votes only to break a tie. A student vice-chairman and treasurer are appointed from within the membership of the SEC by the chairman with the concurrence of the Council. All eleven Council members serve without remuneration except for an appointed, non-voting secretary who is paid for services rendered.

Student candidates for councilmen are self-nominated. To be eligible, students must be enrolled full-time when first elected and they must have a 2.0 cumulative grade point average. To remain on the Council, students must maintain a 2.0 grade point average although they may be enrolled part-time.

To provide continuity on the SEC, the three students receiving the most votes when originally elected to the Council enjoy the privilege of serving for a second term without facing re-election. At the end of their second term in office, these students must be renominated and re-elected. Vacancies occurring between elections are filled by appointment of the chairman with the approval of a majority of the entire Council membership.

The purpose of the SEC, as stated in the constitution, is: "to provide students with an active voice in the administration and legislation of matters concerning the student body at large." The Council also strives "to provide for good citizenship, to build campus morale and to facilitate campus communications and direction through an experience in democratic living which is characterized by responsible communication and cooperative endeavor among students, faculty, administrators and other officials, and through total and meaningful student participation" in campus life.

The powers and duties of the Council, as enumerated in the constitution are:

A. Allocate and approve the student activities budget

B. Work in conjunction with the Inter-Organizational Council through a representative to that body appointed by the SEC Chairman

C. Appoint student representatives to the College Senate committees which have student representation. The SEC

receives minutes of all College Senate committee meetings with the right of expressing an official position on all matters which are at variance with the majority opinion of the SEC

D. The SEC acts as liaison between students, faculty, administrators and other officials and with other campuses and regional and national affiliations of student government associations

E. Make proposals and recommendations to the appropriate authorities regarding all areas of student academic and social life

F. Act as the Appeal Board for student conduct and discipline cases with the Dean of Student Affairs serving as Chairman

G. Act as the Constitutional Revision Committee of the SEC.

Is The Experiment Working?

Although the SEC is still in its infancy and its role in policy making and implementation is not yet tested, our new form of participatory student government is a first step in the right direction. Support on campus appears to be widening and students, faculty and administrators alike believe the Council has the potential for contributing to the realization of true community governance.

At first, students were hesitant to express their real opinions before members of the faculty and administration around the Council table. However, most of the barriers are coming down; trust is being developed among the members and the Council is beginning to work as a cohesive group.

Students are beginning to attend the open SEC meetings, which are held every other Thursday evening on a regular basis. They are coming as interested observers and to be heard on matters relevant to them.

In response to student requests, members of the SEC maintain office hours in order to be available, to receive ideas and complaints, and to "rap" with their constituents.

Faculty and administrative members of the Council are those who also hold responsible positions on the College Senate. Many of the student members of the SEC serve on various standing committees of the College Senate as well. Two-way communications between these two bodies are being strengthened.

A special bulletin board, located prominently on campus, is reserved for posting SEC announcements, notices of meetings and minutes so the total campus community may keep abreast of the Council's deliberations and decisions.

Our unique experiment in participatory student government may not be adaptable in its entirety to other colleges, however, our innovative approach is attracting considerable interest among other Florida community colleges. Student leaders, sponsors, deans and activities directors alike confess their student governments are "running temperatures" and they are looking for new models for possible implementation on their campuses. Recently, authorities and students from 11 of Florida's 27 public community colleges specifically requested copies of the SEC Constitution and By-laws and the demand for these documents continues.

Free copies of the Students' Executive Council Constitution and By-laws are available from the Director of Student Activities at Tallahassee Community College.